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Critics'
THEATRE REVIEWS

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*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of April 28th, 1941.
†"The Beautiful People" opened Monday, April 21st, at the Lyceum Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"The Beautiful People"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *April 22, 1941*

'The Beautiful People' Opens at the Lyceum

Saroyan Sets Forth the Need of Faith in Story About People Who 'Loaf and Invite Their Souls'

By JOHN ANDERSON

IT WOULD probably take another Saroyan, God forbid! to get out of "The Beautiful People" at the Lyceum all the meaning the only true and original Master William has put into it—the skylarking buoyance, the rich humor and tenderness of the characters, the symbolism and the lyric beauty of some of the writing.

These things, I am sure, are in it, just as I'm sure that literal-minded playgoers will complain again that Saroyan is cockeyed if not plain nutty and that he has converted the bats in his belfry into a national institution. For my part I found his newest play almost as fascinating as "My Heart's In the Highlands."

Between these opposing points of view there is no common ground. Saroyan's defects as a dramatist are obvious and he makes no effort to hide them mainly, I suppose, because he doesn't consider them defects. His work can be so formless that it approaches a sort of artistic chaos.

He never seems to be quite sure whether he has caught the world, or merely the wind, in his net, and yet . . . and yet . . . he can create life on the stage and characters and a sense of living and that is a power that lies, finally, outside all the tidy rules of playwrighting.

The only thing to do in his theatre is to relax and take it easy, or be driven quietly home, or better still, out of your mind. Some minds are probably uninhabitable anyway.

There is no use arguing that some of his stuff is tricky, some deeply felt and profoundly affecting, and some simply treading dialogue as a swimmer treads water. The great thing is that at his best Saroyan can evoke clearly and beautifully the wonderment of the human spirit and can capture, in a sort of cosmic naivete, the goodness of life and the swiftness of death in terms that never quite descend to Pollyanarchy.

Need of Faith

In "The Beautiful People" the plot, the story, or whatever you call it in a Saroyan play, is faith. People, says the prophet, need faith—faith in themselves, in one another, and in the world they live in. They must believe not only in something, but in the sheer power in belief itself.

Like the wonderful family that took in the ancient trumpeter in "My Heart's in the Highlands" the people in the new play the Websters, have simple values of their own. Like most of Saroyan's characters in all his plays they lead an economically unsound but verbally satisfying life, loafing and inviting their souls.

They love all living things, including the mice in the house. Agnes Webster thinks she understands mice, and helps them so much that her brother, Owen, says they pray to her, and spell out her name in flowers, so she is called Saint Agnes of the Mice.

On a clear day Owen can also hear his brother, Harold, playing the cornet more than 3,000 miles away in New York—a simple act of faith. Owen rescues a mouse so proud that it lived in the church steeple, away from the others, and if you think that Saroyan has trapped me in his own boobyhatch I beg you to listen to the soul-wrenching lament of the old sot who, in a maudlin moment of violent clarity, says he is tired of hearing all the lies he has told himself all his life. It is a passage as poignant and memorable as that grieving harmonica in "The Time of Your Life."

Hits It on the Raw

Saroyan can hit it on the raw in passages of that sort; passages of old crying, and distant hope; in the provocative picture of the lad who writes books with just one word in them; in the oddly compassionate portrait of a business man treasuring with all his legal papers, the memory of a dinner on shipboard on a trip to Mexico.

Across all this apparently scatter-brained and deliberately goofy material Saroyan leaves the imprint of his almost Whitmanesque love for humanity, of his scorn for shallow and makeshift living, of his faith in people—the beautiful people.

By presenting and directing the play himself the author has made it a one-man job, and he has lured his actors into the sort of dedicated performance that such studiously unstudied theatre must have to get its effects.

I don't know what he did to unhinge the usual technique of acting, unless he used chloroform, but he made an uncannily right decision in choosing Eugene Loring, the dancer, to play the most difficult part—the Webster lad who writes books of just one word. No Saroyan he.

Ballet and pantomime training have made it possible for Mr. Loring to hold the stage at curtain-rise for nearly five minutes alone, and with very few lines. He stands on top of an upright piano to read a book. Later on he tries to balance a chair on his head while talking, and he sprawls on the floor to talk to the mice.

Mr. Loring plays with the concentration of both dancing and acting, and makes the part not only vivid but strong enough to sustain much of the play, even when it seems sadly wabbly.

With equal boldness Betsy Blair has been snatched from the musical comedy "Panama Hattie" and given one of the principal parts, which she does with the other-wordliness that Saroyan seems to demand of his mystical leading ladies. E. J. Ballantine gets some excellent fun out of the business man, and Don Freeman, the artist, appearing agreeably for his first assignment on the stage, plays a small part and the cornet at practically one and the same time.

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *April 22, 1941*

'The Beautiful People,' Minor Saroyan, Opens at the Lyceum

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

WILLIAM SAROYAN'S "The Beautiful People," which is a play about mice, goodness and imagination, was offered at the Lyceum Theater last evening by Mr. Saroyan himself. Mr. Saroyan, no doubt to insure against adulteration by alien minds, also directed and probably made the rough sketches for Samuel Leve's amusingly impressionistic setting. In "The Beautiful People" we have, in short, about as pure Saroyan as we are apt to get.

There is a good deal that is charming as well as a good deal that is tedious in simon-pure Saroyan. In this new play of his there are flashes of poetic feeling and moments of a kind of poetic innocence. When, fairly late in the evening, he gets around to talking sense, it has moments of being fine sense—moments when, more than ever before, he manages to get his warm, gay feeling about people translated into words. He can, at his best, make the thing he calls "goodness" seem to be a positive, living quality. Now and then his faith in the potential beauty of human life, in a kind of singing quality he feels ought to be in every life, comes with amazing freshness out of muddled writing and hurried, slipshod dramaturgy.

It is that quality in Saroyan which has always disarmed even the disapproving, and it has never, I think, been more evident than it is in "The Beautiful People." It is evident, however, only at odd moments. The rest of the play ranges between the mildly amusing and the plainly foolish.

The scene is "the living room, the front porch and the yard" of an old house in San Francisco. (Mr. Leve reveals all this in skeleton.) The characters include a boy of 15, who writes novels consisting of one word and seems elfinly comical to Mr. Saroyan but not, on the whole, to me; a girl who pretends to be taken in by her brother's pretense that all the mice in the house love her and is willing to be called Saint Agnes of the Mice; and the father of this quaint pair, a free-style philosopher. Much of the play is devoted to the mouse motif, and this is just sort of silly. It takes more than good intention to make nonsense into comedy.

There are calculatedly quaint incidents. The father lives by cashing the pension checks of a complete stranger who has been dead for seven years. A vice-president comes around to investigate this, has a fine time with the father and his cronies, and decides it is all right. A long absent brother comes back from New York playing a cornet and accompanied by a morose companion who says nothing. There is a sketchy love story.

Clearly, all this is no more than a loose collection of odd notions which have happened across an author's mind. Mr. Saroyan, who, no doubt, believes critical intelligence inimical to artistry, has made no apparent effort to organize notions into drama. For a man of evident talent and great productivity, Mr. Saroyan remains shiftless as a playwright.

He has found actors to behave amusingly. Eugene Loring is droll enough as the youth and Curtis Cooksey gives a pleasant swing to the role of the flamboyant father. Betsy Blair, making her debut as the sister, plays with the hesitant charm of a pretty girl making a debut. E. J. Ballantine is funny in one of the Saroyan vaudeville turns, and Farrell Pelly, Fredrica Slemons, Edward Nannary and Don Freeman contribute. Mr. Freeman, at heart a caricaturist, by playing the cornet with professional skill. It is always agreeable, if a little surprising, to find professionalism in plays by Mr Saroyan.

"The Beautiful People"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *April 22, 1941*

The People Are Beautiful

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

ONCE again William Saroyan brings sweetness, imagination and a most enchanting humor to the American theater. In his new play, "The Beautiful People," Mr. Saroyan goes back to the evocative manner of "My Heart's in the Highlands" rather than to the more forthright style of "The Time of Your Life" and "Love's Old Sweet Song," and he is more shamelessly sentimental than he has been in any of his works for the stage. There is at least one moment, too, when he goes boozily philosophical a trifle too violently for complete comfort. Object to it for its excessive sentiment and its barroom philosophy, complain of its lack of form and its slenderness, if you will, but it still is impossible for you to deny that Saroyan's remains the freshest and most imaginative new voice in the current theater and that "The Beautiful People" is a play that possesses rare enchantment.

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If it is difficult to tell you exactly what "The Beautiful People" is about, that is not because it is a subtle or obscure play, but rather because it is concerned with evoking a mood, a quality and an attitude toward life, rather than with telling any literal story of conflict and event. Again Saroyan is concerned with the loneliness, the wonder, the pity and the sweetness inherent in simple people and simple lives. It is that combination of sweetness and humor which supplies the richest of Saroyan qualities, and because the sweetness is inherent in the humor, the playwright is at his happiest in episodes wherein the two are amalgamated. When he grows serious and intense about his philosophy and forgets the delightful comedy of which he is capable, there are times when he verges dangerously on saccharinity, because he needs the astringent quality which his humor provides. But even in such few brief scenes there is still something movingly simple and gentle in his eloquence.

• • •

Having called Mr. Saroyan more than once the St. Francis of Assisi of the modern drama, I, for one, should not be surprised to find that the playwright includes even mice in his all-embracing love for the world. His heroine is a little girl who loves mice and tends them fondly and is not at all surprised when on her birthday they leave flowers that spell out her name. His hero is a boy who writes books of one word and hears his brother play his cornet 3,000 miles away. Their father is a boisterous and sentimental fellow, who combines the qualities of the poet of "My Heart's in the Highland" and the pitchman of "Love's Old Sweet Song" and is the author's mouthpiece in his attitude toward the wonder and pity of the world. A priest, a bibulous Irishman, and a business man with the memory of one vacation in Mexico are likewise typical Saroyan characters of great charm and sympathy and rich humor.

• • •

The author's direction has less vitality than his writing but he has selected his actors wisely and has kept the quality of their playing in fine harmony with the mood of the play. Miss Betsy Blair, a fresh-faced, pretty girl with great sweetness about her, has her first acting role as the heroine and she plays enchantingly. Eugene Loring, hitherto a dancer, is fine as the boy, and E. J. Ballantine as the man with the memory of Mexico is particularly good. There is helpful work, too, by Curtis Cooksey as the father and by Miss Frederica Slemons, Farrell Pelly and Edward Nannary, while Don Freeman, the artist whose drawings appear in this paper's dramatic section, assists handsomely with his trumpet. Samuel Leve's set is also in the proper mood. There is so much humor, beauty, imagination and emotional richness about the play that its frailty, its slightness and its moments of excessive sentimentality seem of strange unimportance. It can only be said of "The Beautiful People" that it is a darling play.

'THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE'

A play in four scenes, written, directed and produced by William Saroyan; presented at the Lyceum Theater on April 21, 1941; setting by Samuel Leve. The cast:

Owen Webster	Eugene Loring
Harmony Blueblossom	Fredrica Slemons
Agnes Webster	Betsy Blair
Jonah Webster	Curtis Cooksey
William Prim	E. J. Ballantine
Dan Hillboy	Farrell Pelly
Father Hogan	Edward Nannary
Harold Webster	Don Freeman
A Homeless Young Man	Peter Xantho

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *April 22, 1941*

William Saroyan Accepts the Universe in a New Comedy, Entitled 'The Beautiful People'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

BEING full of the common joy, Mr. Saroyan is expressing same in "The Beautiful People," which was acted at the Lyceum last evening. Call it a reverie by an impulsive and sincere young man who likes simple people and has made a religion out of his relish of life. There are only nine characters. The four acts are hardly more than casual sketches, and there is about as much plot as you can crowd on to the point of a pin. It would make this column ever so much happier if Mr. Saroyan would write a big play some time and tie his characters together with a furious plot that arrived at a specific, concrete conclusion. In writing for the theatre, why not be theatrical?

• • •

Probably that is wishing for the moon. You can't have your Pinero and Saroyan at the same time. And the fact remains that on its own affectionately humorous terms "The Beautiful People" is a beguiling and tender little comedy with an ingratiating spirit of general good-will. In a rickety old house on Red Rock Hill in San Francisco a father, son and daughter are living happily without ambition or practical logic, talking like mad people because they are free. By good fortune they are living on a pension check that comes once a month to this address for some one who is dead.

Mr. Saroyan enjoys these little jokes on the monstrous laws of economics and politics. And so do the rest of us. For the dreamy boy who has already written one book composed exclusively of the noun "trees" and is thinking of incorporating the verb "is" into his next, and the sister, St. Agnes, sister of the mice who cherishes mice because they are God's creatures, and the father who loves big words with philosophical implications and talks all day to men on the street—are all mighty fine people who represent Mr. Saroyan's belief that love is the only thing that matters in the world.

• • •

If Mr. Saroyan did not write out of his personal experience, which has been a plain one, his royal good-will would be mawkish and cloying. There is also some rhetorical declamation that could easily be dispensed with. But all his characters represent either himself or his relatives, whom he enjoys the more he thinks about them, and, besides, he has a generous sense of humor. It is not wit; it is humor that comes from out of the differences between his gypsy philosophy and the conventional ways of the world.

Since he practices what he preaches and believes in having some fun in life, he has put on "The Beautiful People" with his own money—win or lose—and he has staged it himself. He would probably also enjoy playing all the parts if he had time. There is some good acting in this production. Eugene Loring, heretofore a ballet dancer, gives an excellent dreamy, willowy good-humored performance as the one-word novelist. As a spinster with golden memories, Frederica Slemons radiates kindliness and inquiring amusement. E. J. Ballantine is enormously amusing as an ineffectual clerk who longs for good companionship.

Although Curtis Cooksey lacks the rich, warm humanity that might make the part of the father glow, he can handle the elements of the character without jostling. Casting Don Freeman, the itinerant Gotham artist, as the footloose brother with a horn, is practically type-casting, for Mr. Freeman has been living this part all his life, and he also does it well in Mr. Saroyan's play. Betsy Blair is still a little inexperienced for the part of the sister.

• • •

As scene designer Samuel Leve has constructed an amusing skeletonized old house on a hill—a useful setting that acts almost as well as Mr. Loring and Mr. Ballantine. As a playwright Mr. Saroyan is an amateur in the proper meaning of that word—one who practices an art "for the love of it." In its sketchiness "The Beautiful People" illustrates the defects of the amateur. But the tone of character and emotion is genuine and likable. This column enjoyed Mr. Saroyan's little comedy, always wishing that it might be a fuller expression of his original, uncorrupted personality.

"The Beautiful People"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *April 22, 1941*

William Saroyan Offers "The Beautiful People"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

FAMILIAR as by now his very originality has become, Mr. Saroyan's continues to be the most original talent writing for our theatre. His work can dwindle into nonsense. It can be odd for oddity's own sake, and freakish for no other reason than to be different. But at its best—at its worst, too, really—it possesses a beguiling quality of sustained innocence and blessed derangement.

"The Beautiful People," which arrived at the Lyceum last night as written, directed and produced by him, makes all this once again clear. It may not rank with the better Saroyan plays. It may be one of the most undisciplined of his undisciplined scripts. It may confess at many moments its lack of the controlling influence which other minds might well have brought to it. But, faults and all, it is a play to be seen, and cherished for its magical interludes, by those who care for the theatre and find themselves strangely moved by what is most intangible in Mr. Saroyan's writing.

Mr. Saroyan has a childlike faith in man's goodness. He sees the world through eyes which have not lost their wonder. The doctrine he preaches is love. It is as simple as that—a love for mankind which has got beyond the first step of pity; a love that is all-embracing and warming. It is out of this buoyant, humorous, and yet forgiving affection for his fellow men that such a collection of his boyhood stories as "My Name is Aram" and all his plays have come.

In pattern and contents "The Beautiful People" is more like "My Heart's in the Highlands" than "Love's Old Sweet Song" and "The Time of Your Life." It is thinner, more tenuous, more unresolved than was Mr. Saroyan's tale of the old bugler and the dispossessed who hungered for beauty. It is more sentimental, too. Indeed, it is the most unashamedly sentimental of Mr. Saroyan's works. Yet even when it has surrendered to mawkishness, and is uncomfortable in its badness, it can be (and most often is) redeemed by the freshness of Mr. Saroyan's mind, by the tenderness of his spirit, by the hilarity of his humor, and the unconventionality of his perceptions.

Saroyan's Virtues

If his thinking is not original, his feeling is. What he has done in "The Beautiful People" is to blow up the beatitudes into the kind of iridescent bubble he chooses to call a play. His scenes take place simultaneously in the living-room, on the front porch, and in the yard of a roofless and unwalled house in the Sunset District of San Francisco.

Mr. Saroyan's heroine is a young girl who finds a sudden beauty in life. It is her having fallen in love that makes her see even the ugly and sad people of the world as being beautiful. She is known to her family as "Saint Agnes of the Mice." She loves the mice in her home and likes to think that they love her. One of her brothers is a poet—a dreamer given to writing one-word books. Their father is a gentle fellow, a minister without a church who preaches on the street corners to crowds that won't listen. He maintains his home by cashing the pension check of a dead man to whom it keeps on coming. Another of his children is a boy in New York who plays the cornet.

All of the Websters are people who scorn money and love life. And such characters as the drunken Irishman, the Catholic priest, the little old lady from Mr. Webster's youth, and the timid vice-president that has taken an unforgettable trip to Mexico who wander into the Websters' home, fall under their spell. They all of them see the world differently. And "Saint Agnes" is left believing that her mice really do care for her and spell out her name in flowers on the living-room floor, even though it is her brother who does this for them and her. Because illusions are necessary to happiness.

The Rare Qualities

A synopsis of Mr. Saroyan's script seizes upon its defects, without meaning to have it do so. It points to what is dangerous in its sweetness and addled in its oddity. What no synopsis can hope to suggest, however, are the virtues of "The Beautiful People." These include the charm of the introductory scene with the old lady, the constant flashes of comedy in the dialogue, the hilarity of the little vice-president's searching through his brief case, the heartbreak of the writing of the episode between the drunken Irishman and the Catholic priest, and the final emotion of the family reunion when the returning brother's cornet can be heard coming nearer and nearer.

It is in these moment's when the dew on Mr. Saroyan's writing glistens most brightly. It is at these moments that one realizes how Blake-like his innocence can be and how good he can be as a Pied Piper of the emotions. It is in these moments that one surrenders completely to the freshness, the magic, and the radiance of his fairy-tale. It is then, too, that one forgives his fantasy its over-writing and its repetitions. For Mr. Saroyan is a man who can turn a valentine into a poem and slip it into a Child's Garden of Verse which touches the hearts of adults. He can clown and posture and indulge in side-show tricks. Yet it is difficult to withstand both his love and life and his writer's skill. In such joyous compassion as he feels, and is able to communicate, there is no pose.

Another director might have given "The Beautiful People" more variety in the playing and pruned its short text as it needs to be cut. But Mr. Saroyan can be as imaginative in his direction as he is in the better interludes of his writing. If he is not fortunate in Curtis Cooksey's playing of the father; he can count himself lucky in the radiant girlishness of Betsy Blair's St. Agnes, the dancer-like eloquence of Eugene Loring's poet, the pleasantness of Fredrica Slemons' Harmony Blue-blossom, and the sweet and haunting music Don Freeman can extract from his cornet. All of us, moreover, can count ourselves fortunate in having the theatre served by Mr. Saroyan, even if we cannot be as enthusiastic about the whole of his new play as we are about its admirable features.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM," *April 22, 1941*

Mr. Saroyan at Almost His Worst

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AS VIRTUALLY every one knows by now, Mr. Saroyan not only wrote *The Beautiful People* but has also produced and directed it. As a director, I'm afraid, he quite lacks the lively inventiveness he displays as an author; but it is not direction alone that limits the good things in *The Beautiful People* to short scenes and passing moments. The play itself is much too thin and garrulous, too full of detemined whimsy and facile emotion, and too much given to that soggy, mindless toying with universals which is the sure mark of the romantic second-rater.

Although *The Beautiful People* has little of the boozy gusto of *The Time of Your Life*, it is thoroughly Saroyanesque. What perhaps hurts it quite as much as its tenuous fable and tedious pace is that Saroyan is an author of diminishing returns. His world, whatever else was wrong with it, once seemed delightfully fresh; it now seems largely familiar. His fancies are beginning to appear conventional in their unconventionality. His constant use of music, which formerly made his work more touching, now makes it merely soupy.

Sneers at Stagecraft

And if his good qualities seem less ingratiating, his bad ones seem far more pronounced. His attempt for orthodox stagecraft has degenerated into a contempt for any kind of stagecraft whatever. His refusal to think straight has turned into a refusal to think at all. His habit of wearing his love of humanity on his sleeves has become a positive mania; and at times it is so lacking in taste as to be downright sickening.

Only Saroyan's humor—warm, unexpected, unique—continues to be satisfying; it shows how improvisation can be a virtue, where everything else in Saroyan reveals it to be a fault. Certainly the most redeeming moments in this plotless tale of a curious family who keep mice and live on a dead man's pension are its humorous ones. Certainly the only successful member of the family is the absurdly precocious 15-year-old son who talks gaily about nothing in particular and writes "novels" one word in length. The daughter with her love for mice and the father with his love for "people" are more than I, for one, can take.

Saroyan carefully picked an inexperienced cast which, on the whole, does fairly well. As the young son, Eugene Loring is extremely good; and Frederica Slemons and E. J. Ballantine are decidedly better than average.

"The Beautiful People"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *April 22, 1941*

"The Beautiful People" Play by Saroyan, of Saroyan, for Saroyan

"The Beautiful People," comedy by William Saroyan. Produced by the author at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, April 21, 1941.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

THERE is only one way in which to accept William Saroyan as a playwright, and that is on his own terms. Last night at the Lyceum Theatre he stood, for the first time in his New York experience, squarely on his own feet. And won his first individual success.

"The Beautiful People," which was the Saroyan exhibit of the evening, is as formless and plotless and as defiantly outside the conventions set down by the dramaturgical experts, as was the first of the Saroyan experiments, "My Heart's in the Highlands."

But it is also more completely Saroyan than any other Saroyan exhibit has been because it is the first of the Saroyan plays that he himself has cast, staged, directed and financed.

Both "The Time of Your Life" and "Love's Old Sweet Song" were, to a considerable extent, taken out of his hands and molded nearer to the commercial producer's desire.

On the Record

I resented "My Heart's in the Highlands" because it was, to me, muddled, shortweight, vaguely symbolical and poorly directed.

I accepted "The Time of Your Life" because it was novel, amusing, smartly cast and intelligently directed.

With "The Beautiful People" I feel an urge to cheer, not the play itself, but the truly remarkable spirit that has inspired Mr. Saroyan to take his courage and his conviction in his two hands, thumb his nose at the grinning theatre merchants of Times Square and produce a play he believes in as he also believes it should be produced.

He provided the cash as well as the inspiration. For his leading roles he selected two youngsters whose looks pleased him and whose lack of experience failed to frighten him.

There isn't another play producer on Broadway with that quality of courage, or that much respect for the theatre, or that kind of confidence in the people who support the theatre.

California Nuts

This theatre of Saroyan which, as I say, will have to be accepted on Saroyan's own terms, is a theatre of the imagination as opposed to the older theatre of illusion. Anything can happen in it; anything wacky, or real; anything ridiculous or wildly visionary; anything that happens to float into the mind of its unpredictable creator.

"The Beautiful People" shows you the shell of a decaying mansion on a hill overlooking San Francisco bay. In the house live a benignly contented religious enthusiast who has permitted his children to grow as wild flowers grow.

They are utterly free of normal restraints, in thought and conduct; they believe in fairies and mice and a beneficent God who furnishes the pension by which they live.

The fact that the pension really is forged in the name of the previous owner of the old house, who is long since dead, worries none of them.

For the better part of two hours they entertain you, these utterly unconventional representatives of Mr. Saroyan's wacky world. Or they bore you.

Take Your Choice

Either they stir a kindly feeling for being lightly insane, or they stimulate your imagination as symbols of one kind or another.

Last night's audience had both its puzzled and ecstatic moments. There were times when the reaction was honestly favorable; there were muddled moments when it was plainly doubtful.

But there was genuine admiration for the simple fascinations of Betty Blair, late of the dance, an ingenuously appealing Alice in Saroyanland.

And for Eugene Loring, late of "The American Goof" and other ballets, also ingenuously likeable and pleasantly earnest.

Only the older and experienced actors seemed a little mystified by their jobs. Curtis Cooksey, E. J. Ballantine and Frederica Slemons were helpful. Samuel Leve contributes a setting that fits the Saroyan mood exactly.

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Saroyan Presents a New Play—or Something

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

WILLIAM SAROYAN has returned to the goofy paradise he discovered in My Heart's in the Highlands, and once more comes before us with a strange report on the relationship between mice and men, together with observations on God, humanity, flowers, intoxicants, young love and romantic vice presidents, in a four-scene fantasy he calls The Beautiful People.

The new play—admitting for the sake of argument that it is a play—will arouse the usual controversy. Those who have so little imagination that they actually believe two and two makes four will dismiss it as crackpot drama or, in the case of extreme realists, become downright angry over it. The professional Saroyards, a smaller group but more fierce in their loyalty, will find in it beauty, imagination, humor, wit and wisdom. Mr. Saroyan, I hazard a guess, will be of this latter happy band.

For myself I must admit to being aroused to high mirth by many of his whimsical conceits and to having enjoyed perhaps 50 per cent of the fantastic commentary on the human race provided by his lines. It is when Mr. Saroyan becomes too earnest and hence too labored, or when he manufactures devices brazenly intended to provoke surprise and laughter, or when he attempts to sermonize on the beauty of his imaginary world that I become truly bored.

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As to what Mr. Saroyan purports to teach through this jumble of sweet though befuddled characters I do not know, unless it is that we would all be happy if we did no work and trusted only in the fates and the grace and kindliness of our fellow men to provide us with such mundane necessities as food, shelter and clothing. All of Mr. Saroyan's characters have that sublime and childlike faith in the universal brotherhood, all of them are happy and none of them starve to death.

The play, then, has qualities of imagination and humor that are undeniable, but these qualities are isolated—little islands in a sea of bokum.

The happier incidents of the play depend entirely upon Mr. Saroyan's invention of strange characters such as the boy who proclaims himself a poet and who writes novels one word long, the vice president of a corporation whose sole pleasant remembrance is of a trip to Mexico on which he obtained a toy cornet, a weary traveler who plays a trumpet (quite like the old man in My Heart's in the Highlands), a girl who is worshipped by the household mice and the mice themselves (unseen), who bring her garlands on her birthday.

The cast was adequate—perhaps a little more than adequate. Eugene Loring, who has hitherto been noted chiefly as a choreographer (he did Saroyan's Great American Goof), demonstrated a fine capacity for legitimate acting, and made the character of the "poet" as understandable as would be possible. His humor is graceful. Betsy Blair was vague and uncertain as the girl who loved the mice, but E. J. Ballantine was exceptionally good as the vice president.

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The dear public, whom Mr. Saroyan has tried to coax into his playhouse, will neither understand nor appreciate his work, and I don't think Mr. Saroyan is fair in expecting them to. Instead they should rise and tell him a few home truths, one of which is that the first requisite of drama is lucidity. He had that quality in The Time of Your Life. It is sadly missing in this one.

The fact is Mr. Saroyan's inventiveness is wearing thin, and if he is not careful the whole Saroyan myth, so heroically blown up during these past three years, will explode.

Note: Throughout this review I have referred to The Beautiful People as a "play." This is solely for want of a term to describe it, for it is not a play but something for which the theater has not yet found an adequate expression.